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ASCS BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture

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RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Legislative Authority: The Rural Environmental Assistance Program (REAP), successor to the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), is authorized by the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, as amended. Funds for the program are authorized annually by the Congress.

The objectives of the program are to:

1. Prevent or abate agriculture-related pollution of water, land, and air for community benefit and the general public good.
2. Reduce significantly the loss of agricultural soil, water, woodland, or wildlife resources and assure their efficient multipurpose use in providing an adequate supply of food, fiber, water, wildlife, open space, and outdoor recreational opportunities for the future and for the general improvement of man's total environment.
3. Encourage enduring conservation practices in sound land use systems to deal with critical conservation problems on farms and ranches, especially on average to small size family farms.
4. Achieve annually established goals, objectives, and priorities in a manner consistent with community and national needs now and for the future -- while moving as rapidly as feasible toward effectively meeting conservation, pollution prevention and abatement, and other environmental needs.
5. Limit and direct Federal cost-sharing assistance to those situations where a partnership between the public and farmers to benefit both is clearly proper and fitting.

Program Activities: REAP is the principal channel through which the Federal Government, in the national interest and for the public good, shares with farmers and ranchers the cost of carrying out approved soil, water, woodland, and wildlife conservation and pollution abatement practices on their land that are directed to:

1. Help maintain the productive capacity of American agriculture.
2. Help assure the Nation's growing population an increased supply of clean water, reduced air pollution, an enhanced natural beauty, more opportunities for the enjoyment of outdoor recreation, improvements in the quality of the environment, and better ecological balance.

REAP funds are allocated to State Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation (ASC) committees on the basis of their respective conservation needs as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture, with certain limits on the reduction from the previous year allocation. The State ASC committees, in turn, allot the funds to the county ASC committees.

The State program is developed jointly by ASC committees, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Forest Service with the counsel of the following persons or their designees: the Governor of the State, the president of the land-grant college, the State director of the Farmers Home Administration, and the heads of the State soil conservation committee (board or commission), the State agricultural extension service, the State agency having responsibility for wildlife conservation, the State agency having responsibility for pollution control or general quality of the environment, and other State and Federal agricultural agencies.

County programs are developed in a similar manner. Local conservation, pollution, and priority needs are reflected in the county list of approved REAP practices, specifications, and cost-share rates. The program is reviewed annually in the light of changing conditions.

REAP is administered by ASC State, county, and community farmer-committees, working under the general direction of ASCS. The Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service are responsible for providing technical program guidance to ASC committees as well as technical aid to farmers in carrying out conservation practices.

In carrying out REAP provisions, county ASC committees encourage persons responsible for any aspect of performing practices to promote public benefits by improving or preserving environmental quality and ecological balance when the practices are being installed, including:

- Preventing or abating pollution and other environmental degradation.
- Benefiting the community by means such as outdoor recreational opportunities, preserving open space, or enhancing the appearance of the area.
- Benefiting wildlife and other desirable life forms.
- Preserving historic, archaeological, or scenic sites of interest.
- Avoiding the creation of hazards to persons or animals.

In approving requests for REAP cost-sharing, highest priority is given to practices which, individually or collectively, will:

- Result in significant public benefits.
- Materially assist in the solution of community-wide pollution and conservation problems.

- Significantly contribute to the prevention or reduction of specific farm-based pollution problems.

- Result in the application of enduring conservation measures.

- Support the installation of pilot demonstration projects.

- Assist low-income farmers with pollution abatement or enduring conservation practices and with participation in community-wide projects.

- Involve youth and minority groups and individuals in program activities.

Farmer Participation: The farmer files a request with the ASC county committee for REAP cost-sharing, before carrying out the practice. He receives a notice from the committee of the extent to which his request has been approved. Definite installation specifications, which meet technical standards and local needs, must be met if the practice is to qualify for REAP cost-shares. After the practice is completed, the farmer certifies this to the county office. His cost-shares may be in the form of either cash or a purchase order for a conservation service or material.

If the farmer pays the total cost of establishing the approved practice, he is later reimbursed for the Government's share of the cost.

Under the purchase order plan, a purchase order is issued to the farmer for (1) a conservation material (such as seed, trees, or essential minerals) or (2) a service (such as earthmoving or tree planting) needed by him in carrying out an approved conservation practice. The vendor who furnishes the material or service bills the Government and receives payment for the Government's share of the cost. The farmer pays the vendor the difference between the amount the Government pays and the total cost of the material or service used.

Scope of Program: The Rural Environmental Assistance Program has a major role in meeting the Department's overall resource and environmental responsibilities. It provides a sound basis for obtaining increased performance of soil and water conserving practices which make a major contribution to the preservation and enhancement of the environment and provide substantial public benefits at the lowest possible cost. The major categories of practices include:

- Practices primarily for establishing long-lasting protective soil cover of grasses, legumes, and trees.

- Practices primarily for improving or sustaining protective soil cover of grasses, legumes, and trees.

- Practices primarily for the conservation or safe disposal of water.

- Practices with benefits primarily to wildlife.

- Practices primarily for pollution abatement or environmental enhancement.

- Practices to provide interim protection from erosion.

Generally, cost-sharing assistance is limited to an amount not in excess of 50 percent of the cost of performing the approved practices. Higher rates are authorized for low income farmers who otherwise would be unable to carry out needed practices. Such higher rates may also be approved where needed and justified - for practices carried out under conditions which will assure substantial benefits to the public, or for practices which will provide long lasting conservation benefits with little immediate return to the farmer. Lower rates are encouraged for practices with temporary benefits.

Cost-sharing is also authorized in disaster areas, designated by the Secretary, for emergency conservation measures needed to control severe wind erosion on farmlands, or to rehabilitate farmlands damaged by wind erosion, disastrous drought, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, or other natural disasters.

Typical Program Results: In recent years, ASCS conservation cost-sharing programs have helped farmers establish conservation measures on about 1 million farms yearly. A typical recent year's accomplishments include:

- 45,000 water storage reservoirs, directly serving 4 million acres, distribute grazing, control erosion, conserve water, and provide wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.
- 300,000 acres of trees and shrubs planted or timber improved for forestry purposes, erosion control, wildlife habitat, and pollution abatement.
- 600,000 acres served by terraces to control erosion, stabilize land and reduce stream pollution.
- 300,000 acres of contour and field stripcropping, protecting soil from wind and water erosion, reducing air and water pollution.
- 1 million acres served by sod waterways, safely dispersing excess water, preventing erosion, reducing pollution of downstream land, waterways and reservoirs.
- 9 million acres of enduring cover for soil or watershed protection or land-use adjustment, with extensive anti-pollution benefits.

Specific Program Details: Detailed information concerning the provisions of a State or county program may be obtained from the State or county ASC committee. The office of the county ASC committee is generally located in the county seat.

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